The destabilising effect of feminist, queer-inclusion and therapeutic counter-discourse: A feminist poststructuralist account of change in men's friendships

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Abstract
Critically engaging with prevailing theories of change in masculinities, this article offers a feminist poststructuralist account of Australian men's increasingly intimate same-gender friendships. Per Beasley, feminist poststructuralists treat social change as a consequence of contestation between discourses. In line with this, I contend that the increasing influence of feminist, queer-inclusion and therapeutic counter-discourses in recent decades has destabilised (but not overridden) masculinist discourse in the context of men's friendships, offering men an alternative subject position that allows care, expressiveness and intimacy. Here, I define each of these counter-discourses, demonstrate how they challenge the discursive components of masculinism and use snippets of data from an intergenerational study of Australian men's friendships to illustrate how this shapes men's homosocial practices. Ultimately, I argue that by applying a feminist poststructuralist lens, scholars can examine how men navigate new and contentious discursive terrain, and better account for the complexity of social change in masculinities.

Keywords
emotion, feminism, feminist poststructuralism, friendship, homophobia, intimacy, masculinity, therapeutic discourse

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Introduction

Recent research documents a remarkable transformation in men's friendships. Multiple studies have found that (mostly young) men are now more physically affectionate, emotionally expressive and comfortable discussing sensitive issues with their friends (e.g. Anderson et al., 2012; McCormack, 2012; Roberts et al., 2017). These developments have been theorised in several ways. Notably, Anderson's (2009) inclusive masculinity theory posits that the decline in cultural homophobia is causing what Connell (1995) theorised as the structures of 'hegemonic masculinity' to disintegrate, allowing more inclusive masculinities to exist in relative harmony with other, more traditional forms. However, some argue that this optimistic lens obscures how softened masculinities still 'entail an adherence to old forms of gender hierarchy' (Ingram & Waller, 2014, p. 39). As such, Demetriou (2001) and Bridges and Pascoe (2014) propose the concept of hybrid masculinity, which contends that men in privileged social categories adopt hybrid identities to symbolically position themselves alongside or as part of socially subordinated groups, in ways that not only conceal but further entrench their privilege.

The emergence of these opposing conceptualisations of change has had a polarising effect on the field, with scholars citing swathes of empirical studies to prove either the persistence of masculinities that legitimate unequal gender relations (Messerschmidt, 2018) or the existence of those that decidedly do not (Anderson & Magrath, 2019). Yet, amid this debate, a clear explanation of why masculinities are emerging in such paradoxical ways remains elusive. This is significant, not just theoretically, but in a practical sense, too. To pursue positive change in masculinities, we must understand its mechanics. This can only be achieved by documenting socio-positive change alongside the continuation of socio-negative conventions of masculinity (Roberts, 2018). The pressing question should therefore not be: which of the prevailing theories covers more empirical ground? But rather: if both theoretical positions are well-argued and well-evidenced, how is it that the phenomena they each describe can (and arguably, do) coexist?

Building on the work of Beasley (2012), Whitehead (2002) and Waling (2019), I offer a feminist poststructuralist account of men's more intimate same-gender friendships that accounts for agency, reflexivity and the complexity of social change. Within this framework, social change is thought to arise 'out of contestation between discourses' (Beasley, 2012, p. 756). In line with this, I posit that the convergence of feminist, queer-inclusion and therapeutic counter-discourses has destabilised masculinist discourse in the context of men's friendships, offering men an alternative subject position that allows care, expressiveness and intimacy. With this broadened set of homosocial practices now sanctioned by counter-discourse, I argue that men have greater 'capacity for agentive and emotionally reflective choices' about how they interact with their male friends (Waling, 2019, p. 102).

Here, I provide a detailed explanation of this theoretical proposition. First, I briefly map theoretical debates in the critical studies on men and masculinities (CSMM) field, noting relevant gaps in relation to conceptualising change and continuity. I then outline the core tenets of feminist poststructuralism, detail Whitehead's (2002) framework for understanding masculinities and propose that, for analytic purposes, masculinist

discourse be operationalised into a set of discursive components. Finally, I provide a brief definition of feminist discourse, therapeutic discourse and queer-inclusion discourse, and demonstrate how they each challenge discursive components of masculinism and thus that their convergence can destabilise this dominant discourse. To illustrate this argument, I include snippets of data from an intergenerational study of Australian men's friendships. Ultimately, I argue that by applying a feminist poststructuralist lens, CSMM scholars can examine how men navigate new and contentious discursive terrain, and better account for the emergence of socio-positive change alongside the continuance of socio-negative conventions of masculinity.

The significance of men's increasingly intimate friendships

Recent research has documented a significant shift toward more expressive and care-oriented masculinities – a shift that many argue does not constitute a veiled attempt to maintain men's dominance over women. This is not to say that our current notion of *orthodox* masculinity has been static across time, but these more recent changes challenge some of the central tenets of prevailing CSMM theory.

Two decades ago, Coates (2003, p. 199) stated that although 'men and boys have a lot of fun together, at the same time there is a sense of something missing emotionally'. However, a significant body of research has since documented a remarkable transformation in (mostly young) men's engagement in both emotional *and* physical intimacy. In a study of men from three age-based cohorts (early 20s, 40s and 64+), Butera (2008, p. 269) notes that older Australian men were still invested in an 'emotionally-reticent, stoic and self-reliant' form of friendship, whereas the youngest cohort were 'more flexible, emotionally expressive and individualistic'. Similarly, Anderson (2008, p. 617) discusses men in a US fraternity who openly shared their 'anxieties, troubles, secrets, and fears' with each other; Roberts et al. (2017) observe young football players in the UK who felt comfortable discussing and expressing painful emotions; and McGuire et al. (2020) document the unconventionally gentle and profoundly intimate pledging practices of a Black Christian fraternity in the US. These more emotionally intimate friendships are often referred to as 'bromances' and are said to offer 'a deep sense of unburdened disclosure and emotionality based on trust and love', within which men can 'express vulnerability … and divulge their most personal issues' (Robinson et al., 2018, p. 102).

Many men have become more physically affectionate with their friends, too. In his ethnographic study of three British high schools, McCormack (2012) observed young men hugging, cuddling and engaging casually in tender platonic touch. Likewise, Anderson et al.'s (2012) study of heterosexual, university-attending men in the UK found that 89% of their participants had engaged in some form of platonic same-gender kissing. In an Australian study of a similar demographic, 37% of heterosexual men had engaged in platonic same-gender kissing (Drummond et al., 2015). Research in this area continues to emerge, evidencing increasing physical intimacy between (mostly young) heterosexual men who are friends, from a variety of social backgrounds and in heterogeneous contexts (e.g. Ralph & Roberts, 2020; Roberts et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2018; Wei, 2017).

Many of these studies make sense of their findings by employing Eric Anderson's inclusive masculinity theory (IMT). To properly articulate this theory, Anderson (2009) advances the concept 'homohysteria', referring to the fear of being perceived as gay that many men experience when societies begin to accept homosexuality as a legitimate sexuality (rather than a deviance or mental disorder). This fear compels men to acquiesce to orthodox masculine norms and emphatically avoid behaviours coded as homosexual (such as homosocial intimacy) in order to maintain their heteromasculinity (Anderson, 2009). However, IMT posits that as cultural homophobia decreases 'a hegemonic form of conservative masculinity will lose its dominance, and softer masculinities will exist without the use of social stigma to police them' (Anderson, 2009, p. 96). Within these conditions, Anderson argues that gay men experience less stigmatisation, men's attitudes towards women improve and men become more comfortable engaging in previously feminised behaviours.

Like all influential social theories, IMT has been subjected to vigorous critique. Some scholars argue that the theory promotes unwarranted optimism about change in masculinities as it frames gender relations as a 'postmodern co-existence of multiple masculine cultures that entail no relationship of power' (Ingram & Waller, 2014, pp. 39–40). Others contend that IMT supports the postfeminist logic that gender and sexual equality are largely achieved, and thus simultaneously accounts for and undoes the work of feminism (O'Neill, 2015). Anderson and McCormack (2018) offer an adept response to these critiques, noting that they repeatedly acknowledge the ongoing issue of heterosexism in their work and do not claim that changing masculinities is synonymous with gender utopia. Yet CSMM scholars still question whether the changes documented by proponents of IMT are simply a repackaging of male dominance (e.g. Bridges & Pascoe, 2014).

Building on Connell's work, Demetriou (2001) conceptualised 'hybrid masculinities' to explain the widespread adoption of previously feminised and homosexualised behaviours. Citing the appropriation of 'gay culture' by heterosexual men, he argues that, when necessary for the reproduction of patriarchy, the hegemonic form will appropriate elements of non-hegemonic masculinities. Likewise, Bridges and Pascoe (2014) highlight that men in privileged social categories may adopt hybrid identities to symbolically position themselves alongside socially subordinated groups, in ways that conceal and further entrench their privilege. In light of more positive accounts of change in masculinities, they implore CSMM scholars to remain alert to this hybridity and the flexibility of patriarchy. They argue that, as society becomes increasingly aware of male privilege, 'the "legitimating stories" or justifications for existing systems of inequality and power' change, and men engage in new forms of identity work that renders their privilege unrecognisable once more (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, p. 256). As such, Bridges and Pascoe (2014, p. 256) stress the importance of identifying 'how and when real – not just stylistic – change happens in the gender order'.

In research that employs hegemonic masculinity or hybrid masculinity as a conceptual framework, observed social change is viewed as 'a top-down reconfiguration and fortification of existing power relations' (Roberts, 2018, p. 50). Men's gender practice is thereby reduced to the systematic pursuit of power (Whitehead, 2002). Thus, the prospects for positive social change in masculinities are negligible within Connell's

theorising, and from much research that deploys it (Howson, 2006). As aptly summarised by Duncanson (2015, p. 240):

> It is as if any shift in gender relations is inevitably hegemony at work; and there is little point in asking whether such shifts might be signs of progressive change, and, more importantly, how they could be furthered.

On the other hand, given that the logic of IMT hinges largely on the decline of cultural homophobia, it has limited analytic capacity to account for other cultural discourses that shape men's gender practice. As a result, IMT cannot necessarily explain the continuation of negative conventions of masculinity in contexts that are ostensibly not homophobic, or the persistence of homophobia among men who embrace homosocial intimacy. Both schools of thought offer invaluable insights and analytic tools, but the gap between them remains a crucial blind spot in the field.

A growing body of research sheds some light on what happens between *hegemony* and *inclusivity*, highlighting both change and continuity in men's gender practice. Brandth's (2019) study of Norwegian farmers and Brooks and Hodkinson's (2020) study of primary caregiving fathers in the UK document the adoption of softer, more caring approaches to parenthood, and a move away from compensatory masculinising strategies. Yet they note that women are still considered to be *in charge* in the home (Brandth, 2019), and that men do not fully embrace traditionally maternal burdens (Brooks & Hodkinson, 2020). Similarly, in my previous research I document increasing homosocial intimacy among young Australian men but note that these men still homosexualise some forms of platonic physical intimacy (Ralph & Roberts, 2020).

Such findings appear to support critiques of IMT's optimism, yet still represent a positive shift in the style *and* substance of masculine norms. Brandth (2019) notes that her participants' fathering practices not only demonstrate a softening of local agricultural masculinities but could disrupt traditional processes of patrilineal succession. Similarly, while participants in my previous study (Ralph & Roberts, 2020) only kiss and cuddle as a joke or a dare, the normalisation of homosocial touch means that hugging and saying 'I love you' are less strictly policed. Characterising these findings as hybridity or repackaged domination does not do justice to the socio-positive impacts, nor to the complex process of social change they represent. Like Duncanson (2015), one could situate these findings between existing theorisations – as an initial step toward dismantling hegemonic masculinity, even if they do not represent a complete elimination of gendered hierarchies. It is this *middle ground* that prevailing CSMM theory is yet to convincingly account for.

Writing in the early 1990s, Donaldson (1993, p. 645) describes masculinity as 'a lived experience, an economic and cultural force, and dependent on social arrangements'. Yet, the idea that masculinity is dependent on social arrangements rarely factors into scholarly understandings of how and why masculinities *change*. For much of the 20th century, masculinity and femininity existed in a complementary relationship, both internally with one another and externally with dominant ideas about family, health, sexuality, education, work and politics in the West. As aptly noted by Segal (1990, p. xxxvi), 'resistance to change is … bound up with persisting gender routines which characterise most of

the wider economic, social and political structures of contemporary society'. But in recent decades these arrangements have begun to change. While we do not live in a postfeminist society, it can be argued that gradual social shifts relating to women's participation in the workforce, marriage equality and the de-stigmatisation of mental health could play a role in promoting positive change in masculinities. Anderson's work touches on this by demonstrating how a decline in cultural homophobia has broadened the possibilities for men's homosocial interactions. Similarly, Aboim (2010, p. 154) found that socio-political changes like 'the massive entry of women into the labour market … the postponing of family and professional responsibilities … [and] socio-economic development' can positively influence how men discuss sex and sexuality. Per the remainder of Segal's (1990, p. xxxvi) quotation:

> social realities are not static. Future relations between women and men remain open, battles are continuously fought, lost and won; and change, whether the intended outcome of emancipatory activity or the unintended consequences of other agencies, is inevitable… It is possible to steer a course between defeatist pessimism and fatuous optimism.

To borrow her phraseology: Such is the project of this article.

As societies work to undo patriarchy, heterosexism and other forms of stigma, the possibilities for acceptable male behaviour expand. There is still misogyny, violence and homophobia but there is also, now, socially sanctioned space for care, intimacy and a more egalitarian approach to gender relations. The persistence of the former should not negate the growing empirical evidence of the latter. Yet, by overemphasising the role of structure, prevailing frameworks risk reifying this dichotomy. In a recent Global Dialogue article, Connell (2022) herself cautions against an over-emphasis on structural determination and notes the strategic importance of theorising the 'more egalitarian forms of masculinity, which … prefigure ways for men to live in a gender-equal society'. What is needed, then, is a theoretical framework that captures both change and continuity, and better accounts for men's agency.

A feminist poststructuralist account of change in men's friendships

In a pertinent critique of the CSMM field, Waling (2019) takes issue with the practice of naming masculinities, and the corresponding tendency to overlook men's agency and capacity for reflexivity. Rather than determining which *type* of masculinity particular men embody (or are oppressed by), she implores CSMM scholars to examine how men reflect on and 'reconcile their engagement with masculinity amid increased awareness of systemic and structural inequalities produced by relations of gender' (Waling, 2019, p. 102). To this end, she notes the benefits of a feminist poststructuralist approach.

Poststructuralism acknowledges the existence of a material reality but rejects any allusion to essential meaning or objective 'truths', asserting instead that 'all meaning and knowledge is discursively constituted through language and other signifying practices' (Gavey, 1989, p. 464). The poststructuralist *subject* – and any knowledge it possesses or experiences it has – is also socially constituted in discourse, and is thus inherently

fragmented, contradictory and inconsistent (Gavey, 1989). Importantly, language in this context is not a neutral reflection of reality but is 'recursively intertwined with systems of power – producing and legitimising "truths", identities, and subjectivities' (Cosma & Gurevich, 2020, p. 48). Within this framework, the question of structure versus agency is replaced by a consideration of how subjects navigate particular discursive terrains.

For feminist poststructuralists, gender is not simultaneously done to us (structure) and by us (agency) (as in Connell's 'weak-modernist account of power'), 'gender *is* done by stylised repetition' of particular gendered conventions (Beasley, 2012, p. 757; see also Butler, 1990). These conventions are produced by dominant discourses that 'carry knowledge and truth effects through their capacity to signal what it is possible to speak of and do at a particular moment' (Whitehead, 2002, p. 103), thereby either perpetuating or challenging existing gender relations. Yet, while dominant discourses have normative effects, there are always competing discourses that facilitate reflexivity, resistance, and the potential for radical social change (Kiesling, 2005). The goal of feminist poststructuralist research is thus to identify dominant (and competing) discourses of gender, examine how individuals are subjected to and in turn deploy, negotiate or resist these discourses, and highlight the material consequences arising from these practices of gender signification.

Applying this framework to the study of masculinities, Whitehead (2002) conceptualises men as masculine subjects who – in the absence of a pre-discursive, inner self – are driven by the desire to be (a man) and take up (and are in turn disciplined by) prevailing discourses of ideal masculinity as means of self-signification. Within this framework there is still a strong focus on the power embedded in masculinities, 'their potentially oppressive properties, the material actualities of gender inequality and the political dimensions of identity work' (Whitehead, 2002, p. 110). Indeed, a useful element of Whitehead's writing is the rearticulation of masculine hierarchies not as top-down hegemonic structures, but as the product of masculinist discourse. Originally theorised by Brittan (1989, p. 4), masculinism is:

> the ideology that justifies and naturalises male domination … takes for granted that there is a fundamental difference between men and women … assumes heterosexuality is normal … [and] sanctions the political and dominant role of men in the public and private spheres.

Whitehead argues that, if the ideological framework and assumptions underpinning this definition are replaced by a discursive understanding of power, masculinism can be understood as a dominant discourse of gender and thus retained by poststructuralists as a useful theoretical tool. As the dominant discourse of gender, masculinism 'legitimate[s] existing power relations and structures by defining what is "normal", [such that] alternative or "oppositional" subject positions are not usually perceived as desirable or even possible' (Allen, 2003, p. 216). Thus, by abiding, promoting and policing dominant discourse, those whose supremacy it legitimates maintain their access to material advantage and power (Gavey, 1989). However, as a cultural discourse, the dominance of masculinism need not depend on claims that all men endorse or successfully embody it (Kiesling, 2005). Indeed, while masculinism has material impacts on, for example, organisational culture and the sexual division of labour, it is not inevitable or permanent. Treating

masculinism as a dominant discourse therefore allows poststructuralist scholars to retain some key tenets of hegemonic masculinity, while employing an analytic framework that better accounts for social change.

Building on Whitehead's thinking and informed by existing literature, I propose the overarching discourse of masculinism (as it relates to homosociality) be operationalised into the following interrelated discursive components:

1. gender difference – the notion that men and women are inherently different in both biology and behaviour (Kiesling, 2005)
2. male dominance – the alignment of masculinity with authority and control (Kiesling, 2005)
3. heterosexism – the conflation of masculinity with heterosexuality (Kiesling, 2005)
4. male solidarity – the cultural expectation that men prioritise their relations with other men, over relations with women (Kiesling, 2005)
5. manly self-reliance – which aligns masculinity with strength, courage and independence, and censors men's help-seeking behaviour (Johnson et al., 2012)
6. homohysteria – the homosexualisation of all male–male intimacy (Anderson, 2009)
7. boys don't cry – the importance of emotional control (McQueen, 2017), and relatedly
8. manly emotion – the belief that when men do express vulnerable or *feminised* emotion, it is restricted to 'serious situations of loss' (MacArthur & Shields, 2015, p. 41).

This is by no means an exhaustive list and would differ depending on the topic of research; for example, in the context of heterosexual sex one might add to this list *male sexual needs* discourse (Gavey, 1989), which situates men's sexual needs above those of women. Nor are these discursive components stable. As cultural conditions shift, the discourses that validate and maintain masculinism can shift from, for example, the more rigid notion that *boys don't cry* to an acceptance of contextually appropriate displays of vulnerability endorsed by *manly emotion* discourse. As per the logic of hybrid masculinity, this demonstrates how stylistic shifts can occur without meaningfully challenging men's dominant position in society. Similarly, as societies accept homosexuality as a legitimate sexuality, men's homosocial practices become governed not only by the heterosexist conflation of masculinity with heterosexuality, but with the homohysteric requirement to avoid all male–male intimacy. Nonetheless, the emergence and increasing influence of counter-discourses that challenge these discursive components can destabilise the broader discourse of masculinism, allowing men to occupy alternative subject positions that entail a shift in both the style and substance of their gender practice.

By operationalising masculinist discourse into these distinct yet overlapping discursive components, I contend that scholars are better able to explore (a) which discourses inform particular behaviours in particular contexts, and (b) which counter-discourses operate to effectively destabilise dominant discourses and thus produce alternative subject positions. In the context of men's friendships, my proposition is that positive shifts are coming about because feminist, queer-inclusion and therapeutic discourse have emerged as potent counter-discourses and effectively destabilised – though not

entirely eradicated – masculinism in some homosocial contexts. That is, feminist discourse problematises *male dominance*, *male solidarity* and *gender difference*, lessening the imperative for men to be dominant, inexpressive and aggressive; therapeutic discourse undermines the gendering of emotional expression and disclosure, thereby challenging *boys don't cry*, *manly emotion* and *gender difference* discourse; and queer-inclusion discourse challenges *heterosexism* and *homohysteria* discourse, which prevents physical and emotional intimacy between men. I explain each of these dynamics in more detail below, drawing on data from previous research to illustrate my arguments.

The study

The data used below was drawn from an intergenerational study of masculinity and men's friendships. The study entailed individual, semi-structured interviews with 28 men living in Australia (14 pairs of fathers aged 49–69, and sons aged 20–35), who I recruited using convenience sampling through my personal and professional networks. All participants self-identified as heterosexual except one son participant who is bisexual. The participants come from relatively diverse class and cultural backgrounds and live in rural and metropolitan areas of Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania. While these points of difference made each story unique, key themes emerged that illustrate the increasing influence of feminist, therapeutic and queer-inclusion discourse in Australia, and how this shapes men's friendship practices. For the purposes of this article, I focus on data that illustrates these broader discursive patterns; more nuanced and intersectional empirical analysis is offered elsewhere (e.g. Ralph & Roberts, forthcoming).

Each interview lasted 75–90 minutes and centred on the participants' engagement in homosocial intimacy and how this has changed over time. Following Gavey (1989), I conducted feminist critical discourse analysis in NVivo, identifying how cultural discourses were deployed within and shaped discussions of homosociality, how this differed across and within generations, and whether this reproduced or challenged unequal gender relations. These data are included purely to illustrate my theoretical proposition, for a more comprehensive discussion of the methods see Ralph & Roberts (forthcoming).

Feminist discourse

Feminist discourse in Australia can be traced back as early as the mid-19th century, when (mostly white, affluent) women began to demand basic civil and human rights (for white, affluent women) (Magarey, 1996). With each wave of feminism, the movement has become increasingly complex, influential and – as noted by Connell (2017) – capable of contesting and breaking down hierarchical gender relations.

> Consciousness-raising of women and men over issues of gender is neither straightforward nor without its points of tension and resistance, but I would suggest that feminism has emerged as the most subversive, critical and, consequently, powerful social discourse during the past 100 years. And while this process is resisted by many men, the absolutist implications of patriarchy cannot capture the (gathering) success of the feminist dynamic, nor the potential for further gender transformations in favour of women (and, by implication, men). (Whitehead, 2002, p. 88).

As Whitehead alludes to here, feminist discourse is complex and multiple. Per Fisher (2001, p. 26), 'feminists continuously divide along lines of political philosophy, class, race, sexual orientation, culture, nationality and a host of other factors', and are increasingly concerned with intersectionality. Nonetheless, a common goal across feminisms is to challenge and destabilise masculinist notions of *gender difference*, *male solidarity* and *male dominance*. When cited in this article, feminist discourse denotes (1) feminist critiques of patriarchal social systems that naturalise men's dominant position in society, and (2) the – once radical, but now widely held – understanding that masculine traits are not inherent to male-sexed bodies. The latter is particularly pertinent to homosociality, as 'capacities for friendship and intimacy have operated discursively as key markers of gender difference' (McLeod, 2002, p. 213). In the context of men's friendships, my argument is that feminist discourse lessens the imperative for men to be dominant, controlling and aggressive. Alongside the increasing public influence of therapeutic culture, it has also opened up the prospect for men and boys to practise deeper forms of emotional intimacy and disclosure.

When men reject the idea that a 'real man' is dominant and that men are inherently different from/superior to women, this may in turn alter their homosocial practices. In some cases this rejection is explicit, in that they berate 'macho' men or challenge the idea that masculinity is inherent or exclusive to male-sexed bodies (Ralph & Roberts, 2020; Ravn, 2018). For example, Nick, a 21-year-old personal trainer from Melbourne, said 'men can have traits of a woman, and women can have traits of a man. I think it's just like, traits of a fucking human … I don't think they're mutually exclusive to one gender.' In other cases, it may be implicit in how they frame the experience and expression of vulnerable emotions as human rather than strictly feminine. For example, Anthony, a 51-year-old engineer who migrated from Argentina in his 20s, said 'I think that it's very stupid for men that don't admit crying, we're human, you got feelings the same as anybody else.' This feminist framing of emotional expression may not necessarily translate into completely unbridled emotional authenticity. Men may still express hesitation at the idea of crying in certain contexts, or with people they are not close to. Yet this is not an entirely masculine dynamic; people of all genders are subjected to feelings rules (Hochschild, 1979) and expected to adhere to some level of passionate restraint (MacArthur & Shields, 2015). The fact that men can now openly state that they *should* be able to express vulnerable emotions and seek emotional support from their friends represents a significant shift away from the masculinist framing of care, expressiveness and intimacy as strictly feminine, or a sign of weakness. Whether or not they identify as feminists, Australian men's increasingly intimate friendships are arguably at least partially shaped by key feminist ideas.

Therapeutic discourse

The term 'therapeutic discourse' typically refers to conversations between a clinician and their clients, however 'therapeutic language and practices have expanded into everyday life' and formed a therapeutic culture (Furedi, 2004, p. 1). Critics of 'therapeutic discourse' point to its individualising tendencies, noting that emotional disclosure does not necessarily transform unequal relationships or societies (Jamieson, 1999). However, following McQueen (2017), I use the term in a slightly broader sense, to

describe a cultural discourse that promotes emotional expression and disclosure as crucial aspects of emotional wellbeing and healthy relationships for people of all genders. While not a solution to structural inequality, I would argue that by 'support[ing] the premise that men need to change to become more emotionally open', therapeutic discourse challenges the hierarchical and gendered binary of emotion and rationality (McQueen, 2017, p. 207). The increasing influence of this discourse is evident in men's mental health campaigns such as Movember,[1] and in the increasing demand for gender-transformative programmes to address rates of male suicide. Though it is inextricably linked to feminist critiques of masculine norms, I contend that the rise of therapeutic discourse in these forms has been a central component of men's increasing engagement in emotional expression and disclosure within their friendships.

Therapeutic discourse can emerge in men's lives in various ways. For example, Matt, a 28-year-old electrician living in Brisbane, said public health campaigns are common in his workplace: 'there's 'R U OK' day and then, as well, I've been a big supporter of … TradeMutt,[2] they make these outrageous shirts that support men's health'. For others, it might emerge through more formal channels. Andrew, a 54-year-old public servant living in Tasmania, explained that his transition to more emotionally in-depth friendships was partly facilitated by a weekly, all-male therapy group he attended as part of his treatment for depression: 'maybe because we came from therapy where we were forced to talk about stuff, we found it pretty easy to continue after therapy, because our relationship wasn't based on the usual male bullshit'. This increasingly present and influential discourse, I argue, is part of the reason Australian men can now acknowledge that vulnerability and emotional disclosure are central to strong friendships and emotional wellbeing. Illustrating this, Quinn, a 24-year-old graphic designer from Melbourne, said 'I am trying to have that emotional intimacy with my friends more often … I think it makes the friendship stronger, it's what people need.'

Following McQueen (2017), I therefore contend that, due in part to the increasing influence of therapeutic discourse, the emotion work now required of men is 'admission' (or perhaps *disclosure*), rather than 'suppression'. Though her research explored heterosexual relationships, mine highlights a similar dynamic between men who are friends. However, masculinist discourse is still present and influential in men's lives, which can create tension and uncertainty. While the men in McQueen's (2017, p. 216) study 'widely described a desire to be emotionally fluent in their relationships … some found this difficult due to a fear of feeling exposed or being hurt through sharing their vulnerability'. Similarly, the middle-aged and older men in my study emphasised trust as crucial to emotional expression and disclosure, citing the persistent sense of risk that they may be judged or lose face in their friendship circles. In line with McQueen (2017, pp. 216–17), this likely illustrates the:

> 'messy uncertainty' of cultural change in regard to feeling rules … despite a wide acceptance of the value of emotional intimacy, a sense of vulnerability remains pervasive for most men interviewed, making it difficult to know how they 'should' feel.

Among younger men (who have been less explicitly or consistently subjected to *boys don't cry* discourse), this discomfort may be less acute, and manifest more subtly as a

tendency to masculinise discussions of intimacy (Underwood & Olson, 2019). For example, in my research the younger men often swore excessively or framed the provision of emotional support as a skill or an act of problem-solving, rather than an emotional form of caring. This reflects McQueen's (2017, p. 207) finding that when men discuss emotionality and intimacy, 'the tension between the traditional and progressive discourses is tangible'. Regardless of these complexities, that men can now feel pride in their ability to give and receive emotional support demonstrates a shift away from masculinist notions of *gender difference* and *boys don't cry* discourse, and towards the therapeutic notion that expression and disclosure are important for wellbeing.

Queer-inclusion discourse

Finally, when citing 'queer-inclusion discourse' I refer to discourse that challenges homophobia, biphobia and transphobia (or heterosexism, more broadly), and promotes acceptance and inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people. Queer-inclusion discourse initially emerged in Australia through the gay rights movement of the 1960s, at which time it principally challenged the criminalisation and violent policing of gay men, as well as the taboos against lesbianism (Riseman, 2019). Over time, it came to promote the acceptance of a wider range of queer and gender non-conforming people, including – but not limited to – those who identify as bisexual, transgender and non-binary. Though discriminatory policies are still being repealed across Australia, the impact of queer-inclusion discourse on cultural homophobia has meant that since the 1990s, to be openly homo*phobic* is to be part of the minority (Riseman, 2019). Nowadays, queer-inclusion discourse challenges heteronormative framing of sex, gender and relationships, and promotes not only social acceptance and civil rights, but the inclusion and celebration of all queer identities. As with feminism, queer-inclusion discourse is not without its tensions, and while anti-homophobia is now more common than homophobia, Australian society is still structured around heteronormative systems and norms. So, while it is expanding and becoming more sophisticated, the extent to which an individual is exposed to and/or takes up this more radical version of queer-inclusion discourse will determine the subject positions and practices it produces. That is, a masculine subject may take up queer-inclusion in its basic form as anti-homophobia and practise tolerance of sexual diversity, but not be exposed to critiques of the gender binary and thus still believe platonic physical touch is only appropriate between women. Within this conceptual discussion, I define queer-inclusion as a discourse of inclusivity that challenges the homophobia that has long been considered central to masculinity and thus lessens the effect of homohysteric discourse in men's friendships (Anderson, 2009).

In line with Anderson, my conceptual contention is based on the idea that the historical dominance of homohysteric discourse once prevented homosocial touch in Australia. For example, when asked how people would have reacted to men hugging when he was younger, Brad, a 55-year-old commercial property manager living in rural Tasmania, said 'they'd probably think you were camp or gay or a poofter … that male-to-male physicality, other than in the sporting arena, was minimal'. However, as queer-inclusion discourse has become more influential over time it has destabilised *heterosexist* and *homohysteric* discourse, decoupling homosocial touch from homosexuality and allowing

men to be more physically intimate with their friends. Notably, men living in Australia whose culturally specific discursive resources precede *homohysteric* discourse may have long viewed homosocial touch as an acceptable expression of friendship – a point also borne out in my interviews with men who grew up in Argentina and El Salvador, or who are second-generation Greek Cypriot migrants. Thus, the influence of homohysteric discourse is both culturally and historically contingent (Anderson, 2009). Likewise, while the middle-aged and older men in my study described occasionally engaging in platonic hugging, the younger men (for whom affectionate homosocial touch has less comprehensively or consistently been discursively associated with homosexuality) almost universally described hugging and saying 'I love you' as an everyday practice and were largely unconcerned about the prospect of being perceived as gay (see also Ralph & Roberts, 2020).

The role of queer-inclusion discourse thus encapsulates Anderson's theorising of the relationship between homosocial intimacy, homophobia and homohysteria, and as such his work is central to this conceptualisation of change in men's friendships. However, when it comes to emotional expression and disclosure, I contend that feminist and therapeutic discourse are equally instrumental to men's socio-positive friendship practices. These three counter-discourses are complementary and interconnected. Though one could certainly argue that increasingly intimate friendships between Australian men would not be possible without queer-inclusion discourse, the same can be said of feminism and therapeutic culture. As such, I expand Anderson's theorising by attributing the change evident in men's friendships to the convergence of feminist, therapeutic *and* queer-inclusion discourse.

The convergence[3] of counter-discourse

Counter-discourses allow subjects to 'reflect upon the discursive relations which constitute [them] and the society in which [they] live and … choose from the options available' (Weedon, 1987, p. 121). On their own, feminist, queer-inclusion and therapeutic counter-discourse may not produce holistic social change. Men might draw on these individual discourses in ways that do not meaningfully resist masculinism. However, in the context of male–male friendship I argue they have converged, challenging a different (though overlapping) set of the discursive components of masculinism detailed above, and thus destabilising the overarching discourse. With a broadened set of homosocial practices now sanctioned by these counter-discourses, men have greater 'capacity for agentive and emotionally reflective choices' about how they interact with their male friends (Waling, 2019, p. 102). This may not always or necessarily result in a widespread uptake of alternative subject positions or socio-positive practices. As noted above, the options have *expanded*; there is still space for socio-negative attitudes and behaviours, but there is now also socially sanctioned space for socio-positive practices. Nonetheless, through this framework scholars are better equipped to explore how men navigate this new and contentious discursive terrain, rather than whether their practices fit within a particular typology.

Some key theoretical contributions from prevailing CSMM frameworks are encapsulated by this approach. Rearticulating masculine hierarchies as the product of masculinist discourse rather than hegemonic structures maintains a view of masculinities as multiple, as constructed largely in opposition to femininities, and as normative and disciplinary but

rarely achievable. Equally, exploring tensions between discourse and practice, as well as men's selective adoption of counter-discourse amid broader social change, could account for instances of hybridity. Finally, the role of queer-inclusion discourse encapsulates Anderson's conceptualisation of the relationship between homosocial intimacy and homohysteria. In this way, this conceptual contention departs from, but also builds upon and fortifies, some of the central ideas put forth by CSMM scholars.

Crucially, a feminist poststructuralist framework does not require that socio-positive change in men's behaviours be absolute for it to be valid or notable. It allows for an understanding of social change as incremental and at times contradictory, both at a cultural level and within the lives of individual masculine subjects. As noted by Gavey (1989, p. 470), a key value of poststructuralism 'is its assertion that subjectivity is produced through discourses that are multiple, possibly contradictory and unstable'. Rather than framing tensions between discourse and practice as necessarily evidence of a superficial investment in counter-discourse, there is space to explore how contending discourses of emotion can produce uncertainty around how one should feel, and thus how one should act (Hochschild, 1979). Similarly, the persistence of individual discursive components of masculinism need not be viewed as evidence that masculinist discourse is still dominant but could instead prompt reflections about why this component is persisting, and where counter-discourse should be focused to challenge it.

For example, in my research I note a persistent discourse of *manly self-reliance* in men's discussion of friendship (see also Elliott et al., 2022) but contend that this does not negate the overwhelming evidence that disclosure and dependency are now considered more acceptable. Instead, I posit that feminism and therapeutic culture have not served as potent counter-discourses to the notion that men are self-reliant. In adopting this framework, I was also able to explore *why* certain individuals appeared to embrace (inter)dependency more easily than others. For example, 26-year-old Joshua's experience of economic hardship and mental illness has led to a more rigid investment in manly self-reliance than other younger men in my study. As well as coping with treatment-resistant depression, Joshua's parents divorced when he was young, he struggled to make friends in high school, and as an adult he has worked long hours to financially support his father, who has been unemployed for many years. Framing Joshua's commitment to self-reliance as inherently masculinist is thus both arrogant and reductionist. Rather, I would argue that while he does engage with feminist and therapeutic discourse, Joshua draws on typically masculinised traits like stoicism and self-reliance to overcome adversity. Evidently, within a feminist poststructuralist framework there is space to explore how discourses operate and interact at the macro cultural level, as well as how this translates into change at the micro level according to a subject's individual circumstances and experiences.

Conclusion

Recent research has documented a shift toward more intimate friendships between men in Australia and across the globe. Scholars have responded by rethinking older concepts or introducing new ones altogether. Yet there remain significant gaps in relation to the role of men's agency and reflexivity in navigating social change. In this article, I follow Waling (2019) and Beasley (2012) by adopting feminist poststructuralism to

conceptualise this change. Rather than viewing gender hierarchy as a hegemonic structure that will exist *until it does not*, a feminist poststructuralist approach allows a consideration of incremental discursive shifts – of change as gradual, complex and even contradictory, but still valid. It acknowledges the potential for masculine subjects to be both aware of and opposed to the problematic elements of masculinist discourse, yet (still) motivated by a desire to be perceived as a man within these terms.

In this article, I offer an alternative to the conceptualisation of change in men's friendships as either a stylistic behavioural shift that is largely inconsequential to the gender order, or representative of a holistic disintegration of hegemonic structures. Rather, I contend that the increasing influence of feminist, queer-inclusion and therapeutic discourse has destabilised masculinist discourse in relation to homosociality, resulting in more intimate friendships but not entirely eradicating masculinism across other relations and/or social contexts. On their own, these three complementary counter-discourses may not produce holistic social change. However, in the context of men's friendships I contend they have *converged* in a way that has effectively destabilised masculinism. Specifically, I argue that:

1. queer-inclusion discourse challenges the heterosexist and homohysteric discourse that once prevented platonic physical intimacy between men,
2. feminist discourse problematises discourses of male dominance, male solidarity and gender difference, lessening the imperative for men to be dominant, inexpressive and aggressive, and
3. therapeutic discourse challenges the gendering of emotional expression and disclosure and undermines the feeling rules discursively inflicted on people with male-sexed bodies.

By challenging these discursive components of masculinism, feminist, queer-inclusion and therapeutic discourse offer men a viable alternative subject position that allows for care, expressiveness and intimacy within their homosocial relationships.

Beyond the academic sphere, this framework has implications for organisations seeking to promote more socio-positive masculinities. The notion of discursive convergence may explain why harmful masculine norms persist in contexts where concerted efforts are being made to eradicate them. For example, while a range of institutions in Australia are embracing therapeutic discourse pertaining to men's mental health, a lack of a concomitant promotion of queer-inclusion and feminist discourse may allow masculinist discourses of gender difference and heterosexism to persist. It also illustrates that gender-transformative programs that establish buy-in for gender equality by drawing principally on mental health discourse may be only minimally effective in addressing high rates of gender-based violence in the community. It is only through the convergence of multiple counter-discourses, each of which challenges the intersecting facets of masculinism in a given context, that this dominant discourse can be effectively destabilised.

Ethics approval

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Notes

1. Movember is an annual event in which people grow moustaches during the month of November to raise awareness of men's health issues. See: https://au.movember.com/
2. An Australian social impact workwear brand that raises awareness of men's mental health issues among tradespeople and uses sales to support mental health support services. See: https:// trademutt.com/
3. The notion of 'convergence' here reflects the process of coming from different directions to *meet*, not convergence in the sense of *merging* into a unified whole.

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